

Diversity among Belgian party members and its consequences

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Abstract

Due to partisan dealignment, parties have lost considerable numbers of party members over the past few decades. It is often argued that this quantitative decline might also impact on the (more qualitative) composition of party membership, raising questions about the representativeness of parties and party members in relation to society. In this paper, we examine the representativeness of party members in Belgium. Using data from a large-scale survey among Flemish party members, we focus on three generally underrepresented groups (women, young and lower educated party members) and investigate: (1) the descriptive representativeness of Flemish party members relative to the population, (2) the degree to which underrepresented groups compensate their limited presence by engaging in party activities more actively than others, and (3) the possible substantive consequences of a lack of social diversity among party members by analyzing whether members of underrepresented groups have different policy preferences than those of overrepresented groups.

1. Introduction

The past decades, democracies across Western Europe witnessed the decline of Duverger's (1954) ideal type of the traditional mass membership party, and its replacement by the more elitist 'cartel party' as a new model of party organization (Katz & Mair, 1995). Parallel to the phenomenon of partisan dealignment and fueled by an increase in state funding, political parties seem to withdraw from society and shift closer towards the state, becoming less dependent of their members, professionalizing their organizational structures and centralizing power in a small party elite (Katz & Mair, 2002; Krouwel, 2012).

These evolutions could raise questions on the 'representativeness' of parties and their members, as some argue that they will lead parties to attracting not only less, but also a different type of party members, who increasingly resemble the existing political class, and are less representative of the entire population (Scarrow & Gezgor, 2010; Van Biezen &

Poguntke, 2014), as social factors are expected to decrease as a reason to join a political party, and career motives to increase (Heidar & Saglie, 2003). This, in turn, might cause parties to recruit political personnel and adopt policy proposals that further widen the gap between the party and society (Allern, Heidar, & Karlsen, 2010).

After all, even though the emergence of the cartel party did reduce the importance and power of ‘the party on the ground’ (Katz & Mair, 1995, 2002), political parties have, partially in response to declining membership figures, granted their party members a larger formal say in intra-party decision-making processes (Cross & Katz, 2013; Young, 2013), for instance by expanding the rights of individual party members to vote directly on important party matters, such as the election of party leaders (Pilet & Cross, 2014; Wauters, 2014) and election candidates (Bille, 2001; Pennings & Hazan, 2001; Rahat, 2013).

Moreover, as parties continue to rely on their members as a recruitment pool for candidates and office-holders, and as linkage mechanisms to keep the party connected to the wider community (Scarrow, 1994; Van Haute & Gauja, 2015), research on the socio-demographic profile of party members, their activities and the possible consequences of unrepresentative membership bases remains necessary, especially in the light of membership decline.

In this paper we therefore examine the representativeness of party members in Belgium, using data from a large-scale survey among Flemish party members. Focusing on three generally underrepresented groups (i.e. female, young and lower educated party members) our analysis will be threefold. First, we focus on the main socio-demographic characteristics of Flemish party members and analyze their *descriptive* representativeness relative to the Flemish population. Secondly, we examine whether descriptively underrepresented groups compensate their underrepresentation by participating more actively in party activities and by taking up party mandates more often than others. Finally, we further elaborate on the possible *substantive* consequences of a lack of social diversity by analyzing whether party members of underrepresented social groups have different policy preferences. By also analyzing possible consequences of descriptive under- and/or overrepresentation, we move beyond a merely descriptive analysis of the presence of diverse groups in parties.

2. Party members and political representation

According to Pitkin (1967), representation is situated on four dimensions. *Formal* representation is about who is formally allowed to participate in the electoral process, *substantive* representation refers to the actions representatives undertake in the interest of those represented, and *symbolic* representation looks at the extent to which citizens feel represented. *Descriptive* representation, lastly, refers to the extent to which representatives reflect and resemble those they are ought to represent (Norris & Franklin, 1997).

With regard to the latter dimension, which is the central focus of this paper, it is often reasoned that members of certain social groups share unique characteristics, experiences and interests that can only be articulated by members of the same group (Paolino, 1995). The often-cited ‘politics of presence’ argument of Anne Phillips (1995) states that personal characteristics of representatives have an impact on the life experiences they gather and on the issues they prioritize. Put in other words, the presence or absence of social groups in the political arena is expected to have an impact on the content of the political debate. Additionally, the descriptive presence of certain social groups ensures that the confidence in the political process of those groups’ members will increase. Since descriptive representatives will experience the consequences of political decisions themselves, members of these social groups can be assured that their interests will be represented in a good way (Williams, 1998).

Although their bonds with society have eroded during the last decades (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2002), political parties remain important linking structures between citizens and the state (Dalton, Farrell, & McAllistar, 2011). In this regard, not only the functioning and composition of parliaments but also that of party organizations is highly important. After all, and especially in Belgium which is often labeled a ‘partitocracy’ because of their large impact on decision-making, parties are powerful intermediating actors who intervene in the relationship between voters and their representatives in every stage of the political process (De Winter & Dumont, 2006; Strøm & Müller, 2009). If we transpose the logic mentioned above to political parties, the composition of the membership base may – directly or indirectly – impact on the functioning of political parties and the contents of political debates and actual policy-making.

The importance of party members comes forward in the following four elements. First, as we have described above, party statutes often grant party members considerable (formal) rights in intra-party decision-making (Cross & Katz, 2013), likewise enabling them to choose party leaders and influence party policies.

Moreover, even in the absence of formal intra-party decision-making opportunities, parties continue to rely on their members as a ‘pool’ of potential election candidates, staff members and political mandate-holders (Scarrow & Gezgor, 2010; Scarrow, 1994). As such, the composition of membership bases directly affects the supply of potential candidates from which parties select (consequently influencing which social groups are represented in the small decision-making elite), and indirectly impacts the policies that will be pursued (Pruysers, Cross, Gauja, & Rahat, 2015).

Additionally, party members still function as a communication channel from (*bottom-up*) and towards (*top-down*) broader society. Due to their everyday contacts, party members are well acquainted with the issues at stake in society and aware of the concrete demands and policy preferences of voters. By channeling these demands within the party framework, they can prevent the party leadership from alienating from society. Conversely, by promoting party ideas in their immediate environment, they encourage political engagement, increase political mobilization and provide the party with more (electoral) support (Scarrow, 1994; Seyd & Whiteley, 2004).

Finally, party members support the party by fulfilling a symbolic role in the representative process, as they can boost the party’s perceived authenticity by symbolizing its support in the community (Scarrow & Gezgor, 2010).

In sum, when party members appear not to be representative of the (party) electorate in terms of social background features, it would be difficult for parties to assemble electoral lists diverse in terms of social variety and political preferences. The same applies for the formation of party manifestos. Moreover, party members cannot fully function as linking mechanisms and communication channels when they differ too much from those parties they wish to approach.

Still, some authors challenge the idea that it would be important for parties to strive towards a proper reflection of social diversity among their members. Representation can also be seen as ‘acting for’ instead of ‘standing for’ (Pitkin, 1967). Koole and Van Holsteyn (1999) argue that the main reason for sticking to descriptive representation is its symbolic value: the equal number – in itself a symbol – is of more interest than the individual representative.

Nevertheless, we do not restrict our analysis to a description of the profile of party members. Next to their socio-demographic representation, we will also examine whether the descriptively underrepresented groups compensate their underrepresentation by participating

more actively than others and we will also take a look at the possible consequences of their descriptive underrepresentation.

3. Quantitative decline, qualitative shift?

Studies on the profile of party members appear frequently. Findings on evolutions in the representativeness of party members are often quite nuanced: party members have never been a perfect reflection of society in socio-demographic terms and it seems that the decrease in the number of party members has not resulted in a unequivocal deterioration of their representativeness (Scarrow & Gezgor, 2010).

One often recurrent finding is that **women** are generally underrepresented among party members (den Ridder, 2014; Scarrow & Gezgor, 2010; Sundberg, 1995; Van Haute, Amjahad, Borriello, Close, & Sandri, 2013; Whiteley & Seyd, 2002). Despite the waning of the traditional division of roles based on gender, the adoption of quota in many countries and parties (Franceschet, Krook, & Piscopo, 2012), and the slow increase in the number of women in political leadership functions (Krook & O'Brien, 2012; Wauters & Pilet, 2015), political parties, also in the lower echelons, remain dominated by men (Scarrow & Gezgor, 2010). However, male dominance is decreasing in many Western-European parties.

With an average of 1/3 of female party members, Belgian parties perform well in this regard. Therefore, Belgian parties are among the most inclusive parties (Van Haute et al., 2013). In addition, the number of female members varies greatly from party to party. Leftist parties, who tend to focus more on (gender) equality, often recruit more female members than right-wing parties (Pedersen et al., 2004; van Haute, 2015).

A second observation relates to the **age** of party members. In many European countries the number of party members over 60 years old increases, further widening the age gap between party members and the general population (Scarrow & Gezgor, 2010). Research in Belgium and the Netherlands confirms this aging trend (den Ridder, 2014; van Haute, 2015). Parties are struggling to attract young members (Bruter & Harrison, 2009), partly because they have to compete with newer forms of political engagement, such as action groups and social movements (however, combining both kinds of engagement happens frequently, especially among members of opposition parties (Wauters, 2016)).

The **level of education** is often put forward as a factor leading to more political participation (Bovens & Wille, 2010, 2016; Dalton, 2005; Nie, Junn, & Stehlik-Barry, 1996; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Higher educated people generally have more political knowledge and can easier process political information (Hillygus, 2005). Higher education is therefore an important motivation for political engagement (Koole & van Holsteyn, 1999). This also seems to be reflected in membership bases: research shows that the educational level of party members is indeed generally higher than on average within the electorate (den Ridder, 2014; Scarrow & Gezgor, 2010; Seyd & Whiteley, 2004; van Haute, 2015). Higher and lower educated people often differ in terms of policy priorities and political preferences. Higher educated people often favor liberal policies with regards to socio-cultural issues, such as immigration, diversity and European integration (Bovens & Wille, 2016; Elchardus & Spruyt, 2012). This mismatch in representational terms then also affects the substantive dimension of representation.

Research on the profile of party members thus demonstrates that party members are mostly older, high-educated and middle-class men. These general patterns have been observed among different countries and among different types of political parties (den Ridder, 2014; Gallagher & Marsh, 2004; Parry, Moyser, & Day, 1992; Whiteley & Seyd, 2002).

In the following part of this paper, we will examine empirically the representativeness of party members in Flanders. There is a normative debate about who representatives, and thus parties, should represent. A Burkean vision would state that representatives (and thus parties) have one common interest to serve: that of the general population. In practice, however, representatives often have a more narrow representative focus and, for example, prioritize the interests of their (party) voters (Dudzinska, Poyet, Costa, & Weßels, 2014; Eulau, Wahlke, Buchanan, & Ferguson, 1959). For this purpose, in the first part of the analysis, we mainly focus on the representativeness of party members in relation to the entire population, but we also report the socio-demographic characteristics of the party voters, in order to nuance our findings when necessary and in order to highlight the representativeness of party members vis-à-vis party-specific electorates.

We start by examining the descriptive representativeness of party members with a special focus on the three above-described socio-demographic variables: i.e. gender, age and educational level. When party members of certain social groups appear to be less numerous than their overall share in the (party) electorate, this does not necessarily mean that their

interests and policy preferences would get less attention, nor that parties would be unable to reach and mobilize voters of these groups. In the second part, we therefore examine whether party members from unrepresented groups compensate their limited presence by participating more actively in party activities than others.

After this rather descriptive part, we provide an overview of the possible *substantive* consequences of the under- or overrepresentation of certain social groups by looking at party members' policy preferences. Earlier research shows for example that men and women, young and old, but also higher and lower educated people differ in terms of policy priorities and ideological preferences. Consequently, a lack of social diversity in descriptive terms could have an impact on the party's substantive course. Therefore, we examine whether the policy preferences of party members in general differ from those of underrepresented groups in the party.

4. Methodology

For our analysis, we rely on data from a large-scale survey¹ conducted among Flemish party members between 2012 and 2015. Party members from all Flemish parties who had more than one representative in the Federal House of Representatives in the period 2010-2014 (i.e. the regionalist N-VA, the liberal Open VLD, the Christian-democratic CD&V, the social-democratic sp.a and the ecologist Groen) were included in the sample. Vlaams Belang, the far-right Flemish nationalist party, refused to cooperate.

The selection of respondents proceeded similarly for each party. First, assisted by the party secretariats, a random sample of 1500 party members per party was drawn. Each respondent received an information letter, the questionnaire and a letter of support from the national parties' secretary, stating that the party had confidence in the proper conduct of this study and that it would be interesting if the members would be willing to participate.

The Dillman-method was used in order to increase response rates (Dillman, Sinclair, & Clark, 1993). Two weeks after the first letter, all respondents received a second letter. Those who already completed the questionnaire were thanked in this letter, and those who had not done it

¹ These surveys were supported by three grants from the Flemish Research Foundation FWO [grant numbers 1521212N, 1504113N and 1518314N]. We would like to thank FWO for these grants.

yet, were kindly asked to do so. A few weeks later, we sent a new letter and questionnaire to those who had not completed the questionnaire yet. Respondents had the choice: filling out the questionnaire on paper and returning it (without mailing costs), or filling out the questionnaire via an online platform. We raffled a number of vouchers among those who completed the questionnaire.

Despite the fact that we applied the same method for every party, the response rates varied from party to party. N-VA and Groen recorded, with more than 60 percent completed questionnaires, the highest response rates. OpenVLD scored the lowest with slightly less than 30 percent. It should, however, be noted that thanks to the methods used, the response rates are higher than often is the case in similar studies.

Table 1: Overview of the survey: number of respondents, response rates, percentage online responses and period of questioning

Party	Number of respondents	Response rate	Percentage online	Period
N-VA	990	66,0%	11,5%	03/04/2012 – 14/09/2012
OpenVLD	430	28,7%	10,7%	09/05/2012 – 09/09/2012
CD&V	666	44,4%	9,8%	21/03/2013 – 12/06/2013
Groen	931	62,1%	21,6%	23/04/2013 – 16/06/2013
sp.a	583	38,9%	10,5%	10/06/2015 – 14/10/2015

Most party members filled out their questionnaires on paper. In almost all parties only about 10 percent of the party members completed the survey online. The exception is Groen, where more than 20 percent of the members filled out the online questionnaire. This may have to do with the younger average age or higher education level of Groen members (see below), or their greater environmental awareness, causing them to give preference to online applications instead of completing the survey on paper. The sample was weighted for gender and age group (-35, 36-64, 65+), to ensure representativeness for all party members within their own party. To that end, the composition of the final sample was compared to the full membership for each party. It appeared that, in general, younger and female party members were underrepresented in our sample, and therefore had to be weighted.

5. The socio-demographic profile of the Flemish party members

We start with a descriptive analysis of Flemish party members' socio-demographic attributes. In Table 2, we compare the presence of the three social groups (women, young and lower-educated party members) in the parties' membership bases to (1) their share within the general Flemish population older than 16 years² (right column) and (2) their share within the party-specific electorates³ (in parentheses).

Table 2: Gender, age and highest diploma of the Flemish party members⁴ compared to the parties' voters (in parentheses) and the population in the Flemish Region of 16 years or older (right column) (% per party)

	Sp.a	Groen	CD&V	OpenVLD	N-VA	Population
Women	44,2 (44,6)	43,7 (58,3)	42,1 (56,1)	32,0 (49,9)	36,1 (46,5)	50,6
Min 35 (N=3534)	13,7 (21,8)	23,3 (37,1)	6,9 (20,9)	9,3 (29,2)	17,2 (21,5)	27,2
Plus 65 (N=3534)	37,5 (17,9)	10,8 (5,0)	45,9 (30,0)	33,7 (18,7)	29,3 (21,8)	23,6
No higher education (N=3522)	64,1 (75,8)	25,7 (41,4)	53,4 (66,6)	60,4 (67,1)	47,5 (68,0)	74,1

Despite the fact that women constitute 51 percent of the Flemish population, they are underrepresented in all five of the investigated parties. This underrepresentation is most pronounced among the right-wing parties (OpenVLD with 32,0 percent and N-VA with 36,1 percent), but also among the other parties there is a slight underrepresentation (CD&V: 42,1 percent, Groen and sp.a: 43,7 and 44,2 percent). Also when we compare with the party

² Source: <http://statbel.fgov.be/nl/statistieken/cijfers/bevolking>. We opt here for the bench mark of 16 years, considering that this is the average age at which people can join a political party.

³ For the composition of party electorates we rely on the description of party voters in the federal elections of 2014 by Abts, Swyngedouw, and Meuleman (2015).

⁴ For gender, we rely on data on the entire population of party members, provided by the party secretaries of the respective parties. For age, we rely on weighted survey data. Working only with population data was not possible for age, because not all parties used the same age categories.

electorates, we see that women are generally underrepresented (only in the social-democratic sp.a, party members resemble the party voters in terms of gender).

Where female party members are underrepresented, this underrepresentation is even more clear-cut with regards to young members (i.e. people under 35). The green party can somewhat keep pace with the population (23,3 percent versus 27,2 percent), but when we look at the profile of their voters, we see that even for Groen, there are more young voters (37,1 percent) than there are young party members (23,3 percent). For the other parties, the differences with the general population are even more pronounced, especially for CD&V where only 6,9 percent of the members is younger than 35.

The reverse image can be found for the party members older than 65 years: these are overrepresented in all Flemish parties, with the exception for Groen, where only 10,8 percent of the members is 65 or older, compared to 23,6 percent in the population (however, the elderly are again overrepresented compared to the party electorate). Again, the christian-democratic CD&V stands out: nearly half of its party members (45,9 percent) is 65 or older.

The apparent incapacity of political parties to attract younger people may have serious consequences on the long term. Parties are likely to lose more members as the older party members will disappear sooner rather than later, and there is only a limited influx of new and young members. An analysis of the number of years of membership combined with the age of the party members indicates that almost half of the party members were younger than 35 when they became member (not in the table). This percentage is, however, lower among the members of the newer parties like Groen and N-VA, where members are on average older when joining the party. In this sense, parties must even worry more about the low membership rates among young people. Today's youth (which hardly joins political parties) is the next generation of party members, and it appears to be wrong to think that they will eventually massively join parties at a later stage in their lives.

Also the low-educated are underrepresented among the party members. This is the clearest in the green party, where only 25,7 percent of the members has no higher educational degree (compared to 74,1 percent across the Flemish population). The socialist party members best reflect the entire population with 64,1 percent of its members without a higher degree.

In sum, this descriptive analysis of the profile of party members clearly indicates that certain categories of the population are largely underrepresented in the membership of political

parties. This is especially true for young people, lower-educated people and to a lesser extent for women. Party members are, at least in that sense, anything but a mirror of society.

6. Active participation as compensation strategy?

In this part, we investigate whether the descriptively underrepresented groups (women, young and low-educated party members) compensate their underrepresentation among party members by participating more actively than others in party activities.

It is often stated that the vast majority of party members is rather inactive (Scarrow, 1994). Previous studies have indeed demonstrated that only a minority of members actually take part in party activities on a regular basis (Heidar, 1994; Seyd & Whiteley, 1992, 2004). Moreover, research suggests that the average time spent by party members on party activities (expressed in hours per month) is in decline (den Ridder, 2014; Heidar, 1994; Scarrow, 2000; Seyd & Whiteley, 1992, 2004). Notwithstanding that party members have been given more participatory opportunities over time (Cross & Katz, 2013; Krouwel, 2012), membership surveys typically indicate that they often do not make use of them (Scarrow & Gezgor, 2010).

Participation activities inside parties provide, on the one hand, an unique opportunity for members (and especially also for social groups underrepresented among the rank and file) to influence a party's decision-making. By being very active in party activities, women, young people and lower-educated people could compensate for their limited presence elsewhere in the party (among party members, in the party elite, etc). On the other hand, these activities could reproduce inequalities also found in other participation activities and lead to the so-called participation paradox (Bovens & Wille, 2010; Hartman, 1998): the more opportunities for participation, the higher inequalities will finally weigh in (political) decision-making.

A factor analysis⁵ based on our survey data revealed that a distinction can be made between three types of activities: campaign activities, selection activities and policy-oriented activities. Table 3 shows both the results of the factor analysis and the relative frequency of each separate activity. The three groups of party activities coincide with the functions of party members discussed in the literature: functions towards the population, towards the party and

⁵ A principal component analysis with varimax rotation based on the nine propositions about party activities led to three factors. The question on attending a national party congress did not load satisfactorily on any single factor and was thus in first instance excluded from the analysis. The assumptions hold up well. The KMO-test amounted to ,837 and Bartlett's test was significant ($p = ,000$). The factors were very reliable: the factor of policy activities had a Cronbach's alpha of ,861, selection activities ,705 and campaign activities ,738.

towards its policies (Gunther & Diamond, 2001; Hooghe, 2005). Campaign activities, i.e. functions in relation to the general population, are aimed at - directly or indirectly – mobilizing and convincing voters. Selection activities refer to participating in intra-party decision-making opportunities in which positions (such as party leadership or the composition of candidate lists for elections) are allotted. The last category, policy activities, refers to the role of members in preparing or formulating party policies. Specific party activities in this category include preparing and organizing party meetings, taking the floor in local party meetings and applying for party mandates.

Table 3: Frequency and factor loadings for nine party activities (N = 3314)

Party activity	% frequent participation ⁶	Policy activities	Selection activities	Campaign activities
1. Preparing and organizing internal party meetings	16,7%	,917	,019	-,035
2. Speaking at local party meetings	27,8%	,839	-,064	,134
3. Applying for a function or mandate within the party	12,9 %	,823	,102	-,002
4. Casting a vote at the election of the party president	35,7%	-,101	,935	,014
5. Voting on the composition of regional or national lists of candidates	24,1 %	,188	,772	,024
6. Attending a national party conference	18,0%	-	-	-
7. Hanging campaign posters in front of the house	55,5%	-,151	,023	,963
8. Handing out flyers of the party or individual candidates	44,5%	,138	,081	,746
9. Persuading others to vote for the party	57,8%	,167	-,039	,591

The results demonstrate that Flemish party members are generally not very active: only about one out of four members are active in policy activities (16,7 percent prepares internal meetings, 27,8 percent takes the floor in these meetings, and only 12,9 percent applies for an

⁶ ‘Frequent participation’ includes two answer categories ‘a number of times’ (3) and ‘mostly or always’ (4)

internal function). For selection activities, this is slightly higher as about one out three party members participates regularly (35,7 percent in party leadership elections, 24,1 percent in approving candidate lists, and 18,0 percent in party conferences). During election campaigns, there seems to be a (temporary) increase in party members' activity rates. 44,5 percent states to have handed out flyers and 57,8 percent tries to persuade others to vote for their party.

By more actively engaging in these three kinds of activities, party members from descriptively underrepresented groups could compensate their limited presence within the party. Whether they indeed do so, will be examined in the next table. Based on their factor scores, party members are labeled as active (above the average factor score) or passive (below average score) on each of the three types of activity (policy, selection and campaign activities). We estimate a logistic regression model with the three categories focused upon in this paper (women, low educated and young people) as independent variables, and party affiliation as control variable.

Table 4: Odds ratios for logistic regressions for three kinds of party activities (N = 3475)

	Policy activities	Selection activities	Campaign activities
Low educated	,646***	,916	,892
Women	,790**	,819**	1,139
Young people	,960	,414***	,688***
Party (ref = sp.a)			
Groen	1,477**	,180***	1,448**
CD&V	1,103	,676**	,809
OpenVLD	1,135	,962	,808
N-VA	,811	,265***	,490***
Constant	,763*	2,823***	1,453***
Nagelkerke R ²	0,04	0,17	0,06

* p < .05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

The results demonstrate that low educated party members are less active in all kinds of activities, but only for policy activities the activity rate significantly differs between members with and without a higher education degree. Also women are less active than men (except for campaign activities), and both for policy and selection activities significant effects of gender can be noted. The same story applies to young party members who are significantly less active than their older counterparts when it comes to selection and campaign activities.

In sum, the descriptive overrepresented groups also tend to dominate in terms of intra-party participation. Party members coming from underrepresented social groups participate in general less and thus do not make use of these opportunities to articulate their interests. Intra-participation opportunities do not constitute a compensation for underrepresented groups, but on the contrary widen the gap between over- and underrepresented groups.

7. Being different, thinking different?

We already demonstrated that certain social groups are underrepresented among the Flemish party members and that they do not appear to compensate their descriptive underrepresentation by engaging more actively in party activities. The question now arises what are the possible consequences of this underrepresentation. If the differences in ideological preferences among party members of different social groups are limited, the presence of these social groups could be mainly seen as a symbolic matter, as Koole and Van Holsteyn (1999) argue. If there are substantive differences in opinions and policy preferences, then this possibly has more serious consequences. Party members continue to play a role in the internal decision-making processes of parties, among others by directly electing the party president and by attending party conferences where the party's course and election manifesto are determined. Should it turn out that an underrepresented group has generally different views, than this underrepresentation could lead to parties being less responsive to specific preferences and issues. This could potentially affect the substantive representation of this social group.

We examine the views of party members on four different policy dimensions: the moral-ethical dimension (about gay marriage and soft drugs, ranging from progressive to conservative)⁷, the territorial dimension (ranging from unitarist to regionalist)⁸, the socio-

⁷ This was tested by an assessment of the following statements: "It is good that the limited use of soft drugs is not severely persecuted" and "The opening of civil marriage for gay couples has been a good thing" and the self-

economic dimension (ranging from left to right)⁹ and the globalization dimension (on migration and the EU, ranging from open to closed)¹⁰. For each of these dimensions, a scale from 0 to 10 was constructed based on a number of policy statements. Then we calculated the means per party and per dimension: first overall for all party members and then specifically for young members, female members and low educated members.

The results are presented in Figures 1 to 4. The party means are presented by a shaded dot, the mean for young party members by a square, that for women by a triangle and that for the low-educated by a diamond shape. In addition, we ran a multiple regression analysis per party with the score on the substantive dimension as the dependent variable and a dummy-variable indicating for each of the studied categories (women, young people and lower-educated) whether or not the party member belongs to it as independent variable. The symbols of the groups that had a statistically significant effect on the substantive position, were colored (for example for young N-VA members on the moral-ethical dimension). If there was no significant effect, the symbol was not colored (as is the case for female OpenVLD members on the moral-ethical dimension).

positioning on a scale going from 0 (preservation of traditional values and norms) to 10 (free choice for each individual). Cronbach's alpha = 0.601.

⁸ This refers to an evaluation of the following statement: "Flanders needs to be independent" and a positioning on the following question: "How far should state reform go for you?", with response categories ranging from 'transferring powers back to the federal level' to 'Flanders and the Netherlands should form one state together'. Cronbach's alpha = 0.816.

⁹ This was tested by an assessment of the following statements: "Social class differences should be smaller than they are now" and "Workers still have to fight for an equal position in society". Cronbach's alpha = 0.597.

¹⁰ This refers to a self-positioning on a scale ranging from 0 (opposed to voting rights for migrants) to 10 (advocate for voting rights for migrants) and on a scale ranging from 0 (European integration has been taken too far) to 10 (European integration should be further promoted). Cronbach's alpha = 0.584.

Figure 1: Policy preferences on the moral-ethical dimension: mean per party and then split up for female, young and low-educated party members

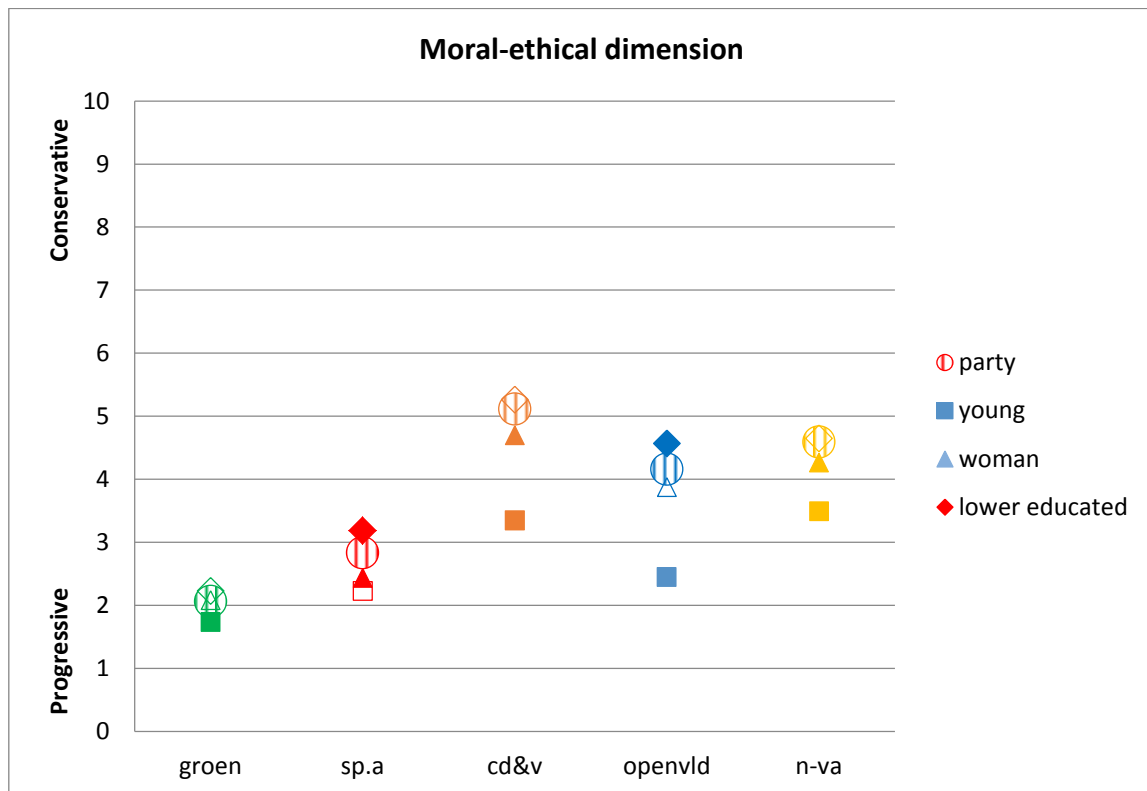


Figure 2: Policy preferences on the socio-economic dimension: mean per party and then split up for female, young and low-educated party members

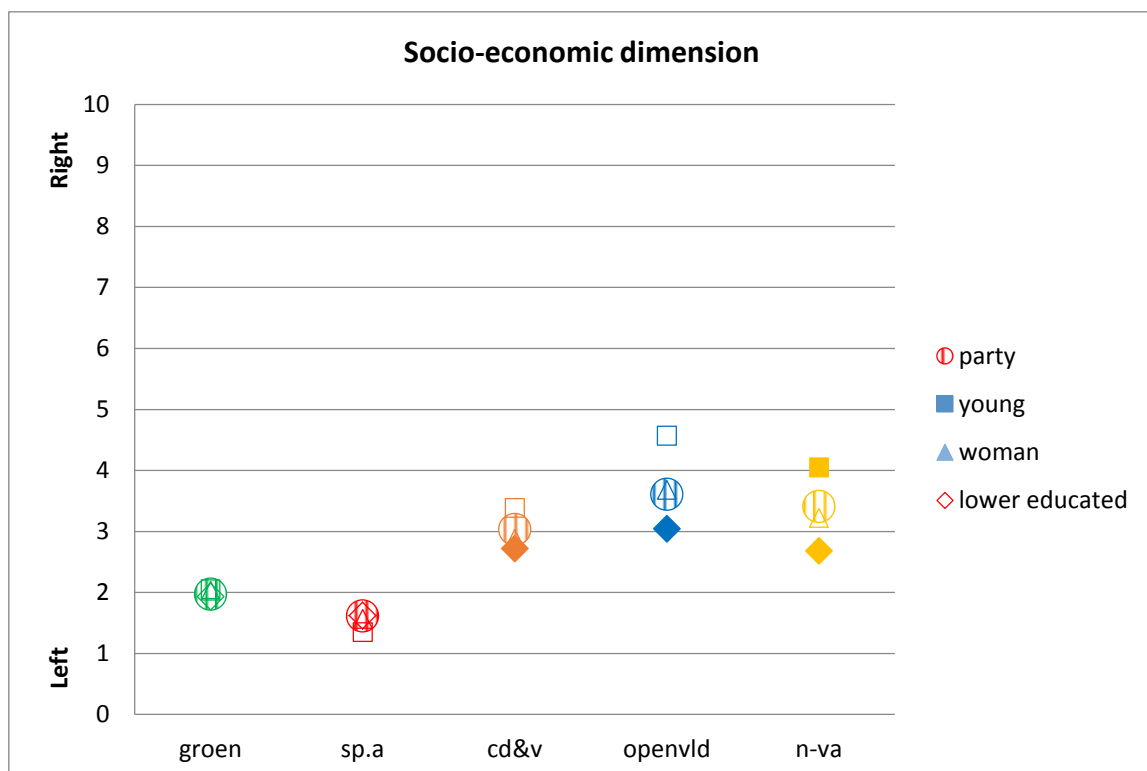


Figure 3: Policy preferences on the territorial dimension: mean per party and then split up for female, young and low-educated party members

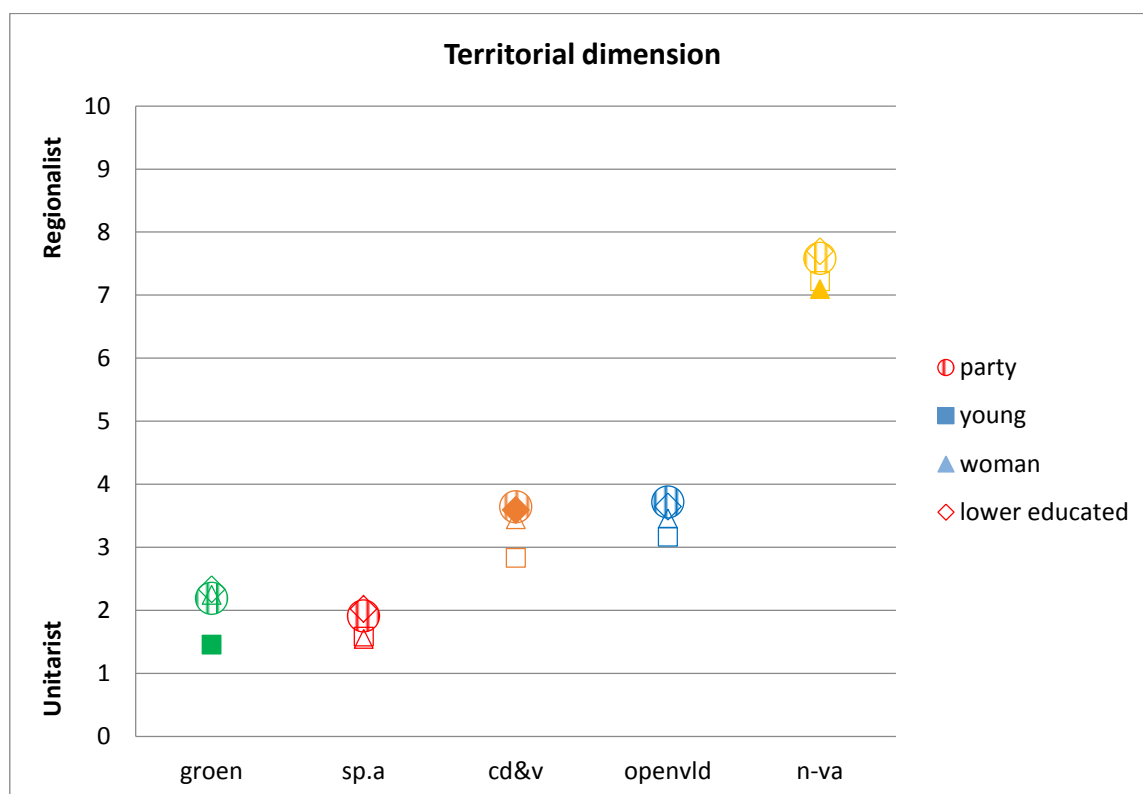
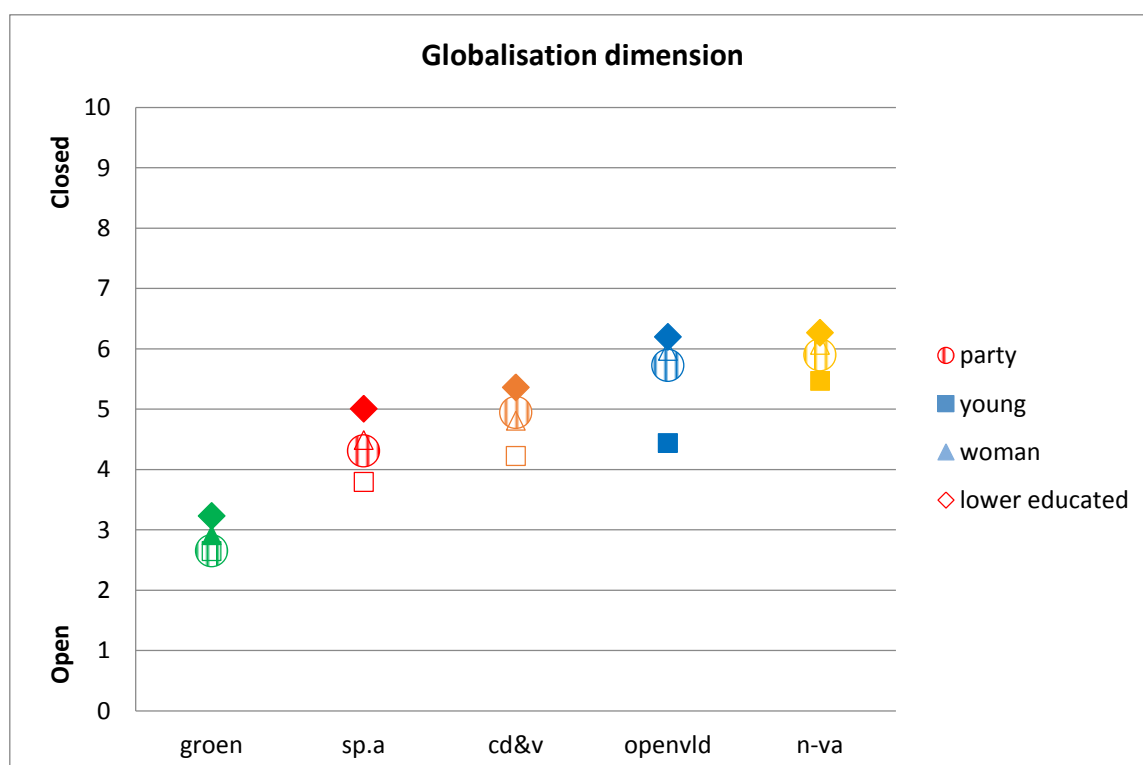


Figure 4: Policy preferences on the globalization dimension: mean per party and then split up for female, young and low-educated party members



Figures 1 to 4 clearly indicate that belonging to a particular social group leads to divergent policy preferences on various ideological dimensions – even though party members belong to the same party. In a number of dimensions, the differences move in the same direction in all parties. That is the case for young people, who are more progressive on moral-ethical issues in all parties than the average party member (only for sp.a this effect is not significant, see the squares in figure 2). This is most pronounced among the CD&V-members: on a scale from 0 to 10 young party members scored on average 1,77 units lower (and thus more progressive) on the moral-ethical dimension than the average CD&V party member. Thus, the underrepresentation of young people among party members entails a risk that a more progressive opinion about gay marriage and soft drugs is insufficiently heard within the party.

Another consistent difference among all parties can be found on the globalization dimension. Party members without a higher education degree (diamond shapes in figure 5), generally have more ‘closed’ attitudes towards issues of migration and the European Union. The difference between higher and lower educated party members is the largest in the social-democrat party: sp.a-members without a degree are 0,70 units closer to a closed attitude on this dimension than average members. Here again, this entails the risk that the critical voices on globalization of the low-educated party members are insufficiently addressed within political parties.

Next, there are a number of differences that can be found in most parties, but not in all of them. When it comes to the moral-ethical dimension, we see that women (triangles in figure 2) are generally more progressive and that lower educated party members (diamond shapes in the same figure) are often more conservative. These differences are, however, not statistically significant in all parties. When it comes to the territorial dimension, we see that younger party members (squares in figure 4) are in almost all parties slightly more unitarist, but only in the green party the difference is statistically significant. Low-educated party members (diamond shapes in figure 3) are clearly more leftist on socio-economic issues than party members with a higher education degree. This is especially the case among the (center-)right parties CD&V, OpenVLD and N-VA where their score on the socio-economic left-right axis differs significantly in each case. Lower educated N-VA-members position themselves socio-economically 0,73 units more to the left compared to their highly-educated counterparts. Finally, young party members (squares in figure 5) are in almost all parties more positive towards globalization, but only for N-VA and OpenVLD these differences between young and old are also statistically significant.

8. Conclusions

We have been witnessing a strong party membership decline in recent decades. In this paper we focused on the remaining members: who are they and to what extent can they be seen as ‘representative linkages’ (den Ridder, 2014) between their parties and the citizens they wish to represent? We did not only focus on the presence and activity rates of party members from certain social groups (descriptive representation) within the ‘party on the ground’, but we also investigated the possible consequences of over- and/or underrepresentation in terms of substantive policy matters (substantive representation), since party members – even in so-called cartel parties – continue to have a significant impact on the political course parties set out.

Our analyses demonstrate that parties perform poorly with regards to descriptive representation: their membership bases do not reflect societal diversity: low-educated and young people, and to a lesser extent women, are strongly underrepresented among party members, and this applies to all parties. Older people, men and high-educated members are, on the other hand, overrepresented.

Two questions, however, remain unanswered in this respect. First, we are unable to establish a longitudinal trend and assess whether the situation improved or deteriorated. Second, it is unclear whether the decline in party membership figures expanded the gap between party members and voters in terms of descriptive representation. Earlier research by Scarrow and Gezgor (2010), for example, suggests a negative evolution as party members have only become less representative in terms of age.

We also investigated whether the descriptively underrepresented groups compensate their underrepresentation by participating more actively in party activities. Unsurprisingly, the evidence does not support this assumption. The descriptively overrepresented groups also dominate in terms of intra-party participation. Women, young and low-educated party members do not make use of the opportunities to articulate their interests and gain greater influence within the party, for instance by attending party conferences and participating in local party meetings. We can conclude that participation barriers are not completely removed when becoming party member, but continue to have an impact even on the participation within parties. As such, participation procedures in political parties reproduce inequalities rather than providing an alternative outlet with fewer barriers. These findings could be related

to the so-called participation paradox: by organizing additional participation opportunities, parties broaden further the inequalities. These new opportunities are once again captured by men, older and high educated members, which confirms that they amplify participation inequalities.

The descriptive underrepresentation of young, male and lower educated party members also might have consequences in terms of the substantive representation of their interests within and by the party. We have shown that lower educated, female and young members have significant different views on various substantive dimensions in comparison to their fellow partisans. Young party members are, for example, in all parties systematically more progressive on moral-ethical issues than older party members, and lower educated party members are more critical about the effects of globalization than higher educated party members. Because party members from these groups are less numerous, these positions are likely to be neglected in the party. This could lead to parties being on a different track than (some of) its supporters. The disparity between the party elite and their rank and file could therefore constitute an additional threat to the decline of party members, on top of the decline as such.

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